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WATERMAN FUND ESSAY WINNER: The Do's and Don'ts of Trail Running in the Appalachian Mountains: Written by a Hairless Bipedal Alien Who Has Learned to Take Nature Seriously

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Waterman Fund Essay Winners

The Dos and Don'ts of Trail Running in the Appalachian Mountains

Written by a hairless bipedal alien who has learned when to take nature seriously

Alex Pickens



DO *BE PREPARED TO EAT FLIES AND RUN THROUGH SPIDERWEBS.* GIVEN insects' astronomical population and their infinitesimal size, the odds are not in your favor, especially since you will be sucking air as you barrel through the forest. Think of them as unintended supplemental protein to your diet for your workout. Gym jockeys may guzzle oversized protein shakes, but you have gone organic and turned hunter-gatherer of bugs. Accumulate your prey by merely leaving your mouth ajar as you run. They will be sufficiently shaken in your intestines as you progress along uneven trails to rival any beverage concocted by health experts. No better way to kick-start your morning jog than an unintended aphid smoothie!

DO be courteous. Share the trail. Admittedly, you can only do so much to prepare hikers for your sudden appearance around bends as you vault boulders or lurch past branches when trees try to clothesline you, and hikers will probably continue to scream and hug stumps when you startle them (and refuse to let go until you have departed), but you can at least empathize with their shock and awe. If they think, as that couple did in the George Washington National Forest, that you are running from something and begin to run with you, break the news gently to them that they are not running from a psycho but rather *with* a psycho.

DO pause to listen to the mad laughter of the pileated woodpecker as you ascend. This is the soundtrack for your life, possibly the last thing you will ever hear one day, the glorious anthem of the trail-runner nation. Whenever you see red Mohawk heads bobbing up a tree, you must pause to acknowledge your groupies, your companions, your standard-bearers, the only members of the forest who get it. These goofy punks are your spirit animals, and in those moments when you are enjoying the sunset alone on top of the mountain and are overcome with a sense of wonder and destiny, you need someone to remind you not to take yourself too seriously, because we all know what happens when you take yourself too seriously.

DON'T stomp on fungi and mushrooms. You tried that once, midstride, and slipped and twisted an ankle and sat in something gross. Make the most of your tryst through the forest, but be smart about how you have fun and how much fun you have. And never step on morels or chanterelles. Your neighbor took you mushroom hunting once and showed you where those delicacies grow (in ravines near spice bushes), taught you how to hide them from casual passersby, and gave an estimate on their price in the luxury mushroom

Alex Pickens running in the Presidentials of the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

COURTESY OF ALEX PICKENS

market: They go for \$30 to \$60 a pound right now. If you hit the mother lode, you could put a serious dent in your student loans. Or you could smuggle them home and sauté them in butter and live like French royalty for a day.

DO carry a hunting knife tucked under your waistband. You stalked a bobcat in West Virginia for half a mile, and he never knew you were there. You don't know when he might be stalking you.*

DON'T freak out when you almost run into a porcupine that you mistook for a wild boar. You are an interloper in nature, a hairless bipedal alien with an unnatural mode of propulsion that is accomplished by thrusting your anemic limbs forward and then following them wherever they may lead, and this is going to arouse curiosity among the creatures of the wild (and some humans, such as the aforementioned tree-huggers). Do not be surprised to find that your noodly intrusion into the living rooms of wild animals causes a stir, especially among the bears. Black bears are the biggest cowards in the East, and if you catch them off guard, they sometimes go crashing through the woods like dislodged, furry boulders rolling down the hill. This heart-attack-inducing calamity might make you stumble on the path, but imagine how they feel.

DO act like nothing happened if you stumble on a rock. As Thomas Jefferson once said while crossing a rocky stream in his wagon, sometimes you have to use all of your knowledge of levers and fulcrums and centers of gravity to remain in the upright position, and it is only cool if you act like it is cool. (He didn't say that last part, though he probably thought it.) Using all of your abilities as an impromptu gymnast to maintain your momentum while avoiding collisions with hemlocks and rocks is a rare skill, and you should own it. However . . .

DON'T take yourself too seriously. Your ego is expendable when you hike in the mountains. Ascending Holt Trail up a sheer granite face toward the summit, you have to have a malleable enough opinion of yourself to realize that your own body could be used in ways that God may or may not have intended when creating you. As you squirmed up that 78-degree-angle rock face, afraid you would fall over backward, you had just such an epiphany and used your right leg as a wedge. Then, squirming around an outcrop in superb caterpillar fashion, you hugged the rock to keep from sliding back down the 30 feet you had just scrawled up in a manner that will have amateur hunters

* The reader should never carry hunting knives without proper instruction and research, particularly because some states in America have laws against carrying concealed fixed-blade knives. Plus, you could hurt yourself. Nor should the reader stalk large predators, as this might result in an unanticipated revision of the food chain.

who use Google Earth searching for the 6-foot gecko. The joke's on them, though, because you made it over the outcrop, proving that making it to second base with a rock is nothing to be ashamed of. The point is, not taking yourself too seriously is a survival tactic, which means that the more you laugh at yourself, the longer you will live.

DO take nature seriously. This was where it all went wrong for you. From Franconia Notch in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, you ascended Falling Waters Trail toward one of the most dangerous sections of the Appalachian Trail. Hikers coming down warned you of the wind, all of them better dressed than you. Yet you forged on, confident the weather could not be that bad in June and that you were built of hardier stuff than those grizzled journeymen in their name-brand accoutrements. But you were wrong. It was worse than anything you ever could have imagined.

DO check the weather before you leave. Mount Lafayette is almost a mile high, and the difference between the base of the mountain and the top is not that hard to figure out—if you check the weather before you leave. Hikers passing you ogled your scanty clothing significantly as you ascended the trail through drizzle, warning you that conditions at the summit were unusually harsh. Did you heed their warnings? No. You thought they were just soft, unaccustomed to toughing it out like you.

Next thing you knew, you were staggering through an ice storm in June, giggling like an idiot at the novel sensation of being knocked on your face



Alex Pickens trying not to take himself too seriously on the summit of Mount Moosilauke in New Hampshire. COURTESY OF ALEX PICKENS

by 70-MPH winds. Like any good outdoorsman, however, you thought this would be a cool time to document your exploits for Facebook friends or the county sheriff or the coroner, whoever got to you first, and you pulled out your phone and took a Snapchat of your handsome self out for a leisurely stroll through a murderous behemoth of wind and ice. Just as you were happily detailing how rapidly conditions were deteriorating, your phone mysteriously cut off, which was the last thing anyone heard or saw of you that day. Undeterred, you pressed onward as the ice turned to snow and the wind intensified.

DON'T forget supplies. A blizzard was hitting, it was June, and you were a mile above sea level, huddling behind a rock, when you finally began to suspect you had made a miscalculation somewhere along the way. You had no long pants, and your legs looked like they were covered with white fur because so much snow had encrusted your leg hair. You had no waterproof clothing, and your entire body was covered with a mixture of sweat and melting snow, soaking through your Carhartt hat and your flimsy Spalding windbreaker; best of all, your left eardrum was throbbing because the wind was roaring so hard over the top of the mountain. You finally sought refuge behind a rock and curled up to slow your core body temperature from plummeting and your thoughts from becoming too muddled.

Now came the important part. Could you get out of here alive? As you shivered and listened to the bellowing gusts move through the rocks, you opened your pack and searched for anything of use. You had eaten all your food on the grueling climb and were faced with the bleak prospect of having no way to replenish your spent energy resources. (It was about then that you started to think the dozens of people who warned you along the trail about the treacherous conditions on the summit might have been on to something.)

DO let someone know where you are going. Letting friends and family know your location and the approximate time of your return will help in the instance that something goes wrong. Even if they cannot make it to you, they can contact the appropriate authorities, who will send a search party. Unless you have gone for an afternoon jog in a freak June blizzard and are currently huddling behind a rock, rummaging through a backpack like a gargantuan rat with its head in a dumpster, in which case it might be better if no one comes looking. If your idea of a weekend getaway is goofing through a frozen hurricane in shorts, your friends don't deserve to die for your stupidity. The age of Western explorers is over, after all.

DO pay attention to the little things. Most hiking injuries are the result of carelessness, especially in the mountains. Paying attention to the details

could save your life, no matter how insignificant. That day on top of Mount Lafayette, as you searched desperately through your backpack, your hand hit something smooth and pulpy in the bottom of your supplies. An apple, the apple that your father had suggested you take because they were getting old and he hated apples and hated waste. Never mind that your father saw you as a walking compost pile, the apple provided the necessary sugar for you to survive. Winter survivalists later told you that this snack probably kept you alive, because warm sugar is the most reliable substance to fight the early stages of hypothermia.

You ate the apple and thought you were superhuman again, plunging back into the blizzard, but as you climbed the last mile into blinding snow and arrived at the summit sign, shivering and numb, you realized you still had 3.4 miles to get back to the parking lot. The time for harebrained bravado was long gone.

DO sufficiently recover before returning to the mountains. Hands are important. They separate us from the foxes and the octopi, so unless you want to lose those appendages that serve as markers of your evolution, give yourself plenty of time to recover.

DON'T push your luck. You made it down the mountain, you shivered in the car for the entire two-hour drive home, and you felt sick for a day. Sure, not dying of your own stupidity is a pretty big boast in your case, but when you are exercising your braggadocio, always remember that moment you were curled up behind a rock with your prospects fading. Keeping the past in mind will help you avoid those moments that you conveniently omit when recounting your exploits on later occasions, such as the sweltering summer day that you decided to jog the length of Virginia's Massanutten Mountain and became severely dehydrated about six miles in.

You will not always have a guardian angel appear out of nowhere in the form of a lanky ex-ultramarathon runner to give you bottle after bottle of cold water, chatting with you about his career and grandkids so that your pride does not get in the way of fluids that kept you from shriveling into a prune on that mountain ridge. Accept help and never get cocky. Remember, lightning doesn't strike the same place twice, so next time it might hit you.

ALEX PICKENS has been exploring the mountains of Virginia and New England for nearly two decades, which has profoundly affected his life and inspired him to become certified in wilderness first aid through the Stonehearth Open Learning Opportunities (SOLO) program. He hopes to become a professional writer.